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ABSTRACT

The education profession as well as the public do not need exposure to more one-sided opinions about the need for academic preschools, about how to generate higher standards, about how poorly United States schools perform as compared to schools in other industrialized nations, and about other potentially volatile issues. In responding to the barrage of criticism aimed at literacy-learning practices, educators have a responsibility of looking at the "big picture." The following suggestions may be helpful: treat parental concerns as serious matters; involve parents in curriculum development; communicate with colleagues across grade levels; encourage quiet time at home; and work cooperatively and congruently with outside tutors and clinics. An educator learned that "sometimes reactive is proactive," by responding to a letter to the editor of "The New York Times" that unjustly criticized a series of articles in the newspaper that presented "a balanced perspective" of whole language practices at a Long Island school district. Students, parents, administrators, teachers, and tutors should work cooperatively to reinforce the perspective that skills are genuinely valued and that they are connected to meaningful contexts during daily instructional practice. (Ten additional proactive suggestions are attached.) (RS)

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Responding Proactively to the Politics of Language Arts Bashing

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In her recent book **Literacy at the Crossroads: Crucial Talk About Reading, Writing, and Other Teaching Dilemmas,** Regie Routman (1996) argues that educators must be proactive in responding to the politics of language arts. Specifically, she is referring to the national campaign for back-to-basics education, which is based on misconceptions about how students learn to become proficient readers and writers. Routman believes that since education is political, teachers and administrators also must be political by actively and thoughtfully joining the educational conversation. The desired goal is to have a positive effect on children, their families, and the schools.

My reading of **Literacy at the Crossroads** was well-timed with political problems that my graduate students and I have been encountering. Like Routman, we are recognizing an increasing number of parents and boards of education who are questioning and criticizing whole language practices. Even teachers in the upper elementary and secondary schools have been accusing primary school teachers of not teaching the basics. These accusations usually translate into a strong belief that handwriting, phonics, spelling, grammar, and study skills have not been adequately taught; otherwise, the critics contend, students would be demonstrating more proficiency with these skills.

Not surprisingly, the media also have embraced school bashing by sensationally misrepresenting educational research, thus implying that schools are not teaching the basics. Adding insult to injury, well-respected educational leaders like Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, have joined the bandwagon by criticizing U.S. schools for having weak academic content and for not performing as well as their European counterparts. In the November 3, 1996 issue of **The New York Times** (Section 4), Shanker once again focused on E.D. Hirsch's (1996) **The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them.** While relying on Hirsch's supposed expertise, Shanker mocked U.S. preschools because many of

them do not have academic programs but do support play-oriented environments. Although Shanker and Hirsch are accomplished professionals in their respected fields, neither is an expert in preschool education.

I therefore was disappointed to read unsubstantiated comments disparaging the value of preschool play. Apparently, these professionals are unaware that children are more likely to be successful in their school careers if they are exposed to serious play in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade; that through play, young children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds express their emerging view of the world while they grow cognitively, emotionally, and socially; that play is more effective than direct instruction in promoting concept development; that play-oriented activities, such as sociodramatic play, dramatic play, creative drama, and pantomime, enrich children with opportunities for talking, listening, reading, writing, and problem-solving; that play stimulates children to make contributions based on their personal prior knowledge, individual emerging literacy, and unique comfort zone; and that the vast majority of preschool, kindergarten, and first grade teachers believe in the efficacy of play as a legitimate, developmentally appropriate experience for helping children to build a solid foundation for future academic success (see Sanacore & Wilsusen, 1995).

Regrettably, Shanker's weekly column in **The New York Times** is actually a paid advertisement under the auspices of the New York State United Teachers and the American Federation of Teachers. Since newspapers generally follow a policy of not publishing letters to the editor that are critical of their commercial advertisers, people like Shanker have the dual luxury of pontificating their fragmented, biased opinions and of not being concerned about critical reactions to their ideas. The most insidious aspect of this weekly advertising statement is that it appears to be an authoritative column about important educational issues. I wonder how many teachers, administrators, boards of education, and parents read Shanker's weekly advertisement, consider it to

be credible **New York Times** journalism , and use its contents to influence their schools.

The education profession as well as the public do not need exposure to more one-sided opinions about the need for academic preschools, about how to generate higher standards, about how poorly U.S. schools perform as compared to schools in other industrialized nations, and about other potentially volatile issues. These limited views are harmful to educators and to the children they serve because they add to the negative fervor of school bashing by suggesting that schools are not focusing on basic skills. Described another way, one-dimensional opinions do not provide educators and the lay public with reliable information and substantive perspectives for determining if problems do exist and, if so, what solutions to pursue.

Becoming proactive

In responding to the barrage of criticism aimed at literacy-learning practices, educators have a major responsibility of looking at the "big picture." The following suggestions may be helpful:

- **Treat parental concerns as serious matters.** Most parents genuinely care about their children's success in literacy and expect educators to address related concerns that they consider important. Rarely, however, do they engage teachers and administrators in discussions about authentic literature, process writing, or higher-level thinking strategies. Instead, parents' comfort zone is understandably focused on areas of skill development that they experienced in their own elementary and secondary school education. Thus, K-12 educators should not be surprised when they encounter parents who demonstrate a strong belief concerning the value of phonics, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, handwriting, study habits, or other skill areas. Whether parents stress one or several areas, each concern should be handled seriously, respectfully,

and individually.

One way of achieving this outcome is for teachers and administrators to highlight their successful efforts in teaching skills through meaningful contexts. For example, sharing with a parent a variety of writing from his/her child's portfolio is a tangible way of showing progress with different skills, such as fulfilling specific purposes, reaching intended audiences, developing thesis statements, creating interesting ideas, writing and supporting topic sentences in paragraphs, using transitional devices between paragraphs, constructing varied sentence patterns, selecting verbs that agree with subjects, being careful about spelling, and using legible handwriting. During this sharing, the parent also should have the opportunity to gauge her/his child's growth with a diversity of writing (poetic, narrative, descriptive, and expository) and with quantity of writing (number and length of papers over time). Demonstrating to parents that we value their concerns about skills and that we highlight the transfer of skills to instructional areas--reading, writing, listening, speaking, and problem-solving--enhances school credibility and simultaneously eliminates or lessens the incidence of school bashing.

• **Involve parents in curriculum development.** Another way of demonstrating to parents that we are serious about connecting skills to meaningful learning is to invite their participation in curriculum development. At a Long Island (NY) school district where I serve as a consultant, curriculum councils are organized in the elementary, middle, and high schools. Each council consists of a building principal, department coordinators, teachers, and parents. During introductory meetings each year, the superintendent and assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction highlight the importance of updated curricula and then ask the participants to join the district's ongoing conversation about building a vision for curriculum development. These meetings usually pique everyone's interest and also provide the impetus for supporting

subcommitte work in language arts, social studies, mathematics, science, second language, art, music, technology education, and other areas. In carrying out the school district's vision, the subcommittees are careful not to develop departmentalized curricula that are potentially vacuous and insufficiently connected to interdisciplinary perspectives. Thus, each subcommittee chairperson, who is also a K-12 department coordinator, agrees to take time from her/his busy schedule and to share work-in-progress with the other elementary, middle, and high school curriculum councils and subcommittees.

Although the work of the subcommittees is never-ending, it provides immense satisfaction for the participants as they engage in four activities. First, the participants develop curriculum maps to determine the themes, strategies, skills, resources, and assessments that they are connecting already. Next, they review pertinent professional literature and learning standards that are required by the New York State Education Department. Then, they blend the curriculum maps, professional literature, and learning standards, and they establish curricular priorities related to these three perspectives as well as to additional considerations. Finally, the participants develop updated curricula in their respective content areas.

Thus far, successful outcomes of the curriculum councils and subcommittees are attributed to the direct involvement of administrators, supervisors, teachers, and parents during all phases of the process. These outcomes are not only defined in terms of curricular packets, but also demonstrated in other proactive ways. For example, the subcommittees frequently articulate their efforts and seek feedback through a variety of formats, including faculty meetings, curriculum orientations for teachers and parents, PTSA gatherings, and newsletters. This comprehensive process is both time-consuming and satisfying; it also increases support for the schools because parents are more aware of the schools' focus on skills and of the important connections between

skills and meaningful learning. Not surprisingly, this involvement and awareness motivate parents to think and talk more positively about their schools.

- **Communicate with colleagues across grade levels.** Sometimes we are our worse enemies. As high school teachers, we complain about middle school colleagues who are not preparing students for the "real world." As middle school teachers, we accuse upper elementary school colleagues of not reinforcing important reading and writing skills. I even hear fourth and fifth grade teachers make disparaging comments about primary-level teachers who supposedly "baby" the children rather than teach them basic skills. If this negative scenario were extended, we probably would blame preschool teachers or parents for not supporting the necessary standards, or basics, for success in school.

One way of preventing, or at least lessening, negative articulation through the grades is to bring the key players together for the purpose of having genuine discussions about how to cooperatively support students' literacy learning. Organizing several conference days that focus on articulation can be enlightening to the K-12 professional staff, especially when primary, intermediate, middle, and high school teachers meet in mixed groups. Initially, these groups benefit from an agenda that provides a sense of structure and direction, such as using grade-level curriculum maps as a basis for discussing and demonstrating the process and content being taught during the school year. Curriculum mapping helps to objectify the work of classroom teachers and provides a tangible forum for sharing this work. The agenda and related maps, however, should not preclude open discussions of group members' concerns; instead, their intent is to provide parameters for positive, productive sessions.

Beyond the conference day format, teachers and administrators need more opportunities to come together. With release time provided by substitute teachers, the professional staff can meet during several days of the school year to articulate their

instructional practices and to share the joys and challenges of responding to students' learning needs. An effective approach to organizing these get-togethers is to seek volunteers from one school and to encourage them to meet with colleagues from another school. Thus, representatives from the high school would meet with representatives from the middle school. Similarly, volunteers from the middle school would meet with volunteers from the elementary school. Then, the outcomes of these get-togethers would be shared during department and faculty meetings, lunchroom conversations, and study-group encounters. (These outcomes also complement the efforts of curriculum councils, related subcommittees, and other approaches to curriculum development.)

Whether educators are meeting during conference days or getting together with colleagues in different schools, the expectations should be clear: (a) to develop an understanding of different grade-level perspectives, (b) to increase sensitivity to one anothers' successes and frustrations with teaching and learning, and (3) if necessary, to consider changing classroom practices. Meeting these expectations helps secondary school teachers realize that becoming literate is a complex process, while elementary school teachers gain insights about the curricular requirements that their students will experience eventually. From this awareness, the K-12 staff is more inclined to develop standards that are appropriately matched with students' strengths and needs. As educators become more insightful about everyone's hard work in teaching all learners, less criticism and more support of colleagues' efforts are likely to dominate the school conversation.

- **Encourage quiet time at home.** When talking with parents, we should highlight the importance of quiet time in the home; that is, for about two hours each week day, the television, radio, telephone, and video games are off-limits. During quiet time, everyone is expected to read, write, do homework, or engage in other productive, reflective,

thinking activities. Meanwhile, parents are either demonstrating similar behaviors or supporting their children's learning efforts. Initially, resistance to quiet time may occur; however, if the parents persevere (for about two weeks), the entire family will probably demonstrate a gradual change in valuing this positive use of time.

Recently, during a middle school curriculum council meeting, a single parent shared her experience with quiet time and how it evolved in her home. For one week, she decided to carefully observe the behavior of her two young teenagers. She was surprised to discover that they were watching television and socializing with friends about five hours a day. She also realized that they were not doing quality homework, were not reading for pleasure, and were not particularly happy. This parent decided to take her children out to dinner and to have a "serious talk" with them about what she observed and what household changes were needed. Her children were both skeptical and resistant concerning quiet time, which she indicated would be implemented on an experimental basis.

During the first week of the experiment, her children complained bitterly as they reluctantly completed school assignments. In the second week, less resistance was evident with school-related homework and projects. By the third week, her young teenagers were demonstrating more effort with their homework and were asking to visit the local public library on Saturday so that they would have books to read during the week. This gradual change in behavior continued during the next seven weeks and resulted in improved report card grades across the curriculum. More important was the improvement in attitude and behavior, which can have a major impact on the teenagers' lifetime literacy. After complimenting this single parent for her tenacity and perseverance, the middle school curriculum council suggested that she share her family's personal journey at future PTSA gatherings. This subsequent sharing with other parents inspired them to consider a variation of quiet time in their homes.

Parents also appreciated being reminded that they are key players in their children's education and that their support can have a major impact on their children's learning of content and skills. This type of humanistic and substantive public relations goes a long way in bringing parents and schools together for the purpose of enriching students' lives. A positive side effect, of course, is more support and less bashing from the community.

- **Work cooperatively and congruently with outside tutors and clinics.** At times, parents will seek the services of outside tutors and clinics to accommodate the special learning needs of their children. Teachers and administrators should not feel threatened by these extra sources of support because they can complement the schools' efforts to help at-risk learners. Regrettably, some tutors justify the importance of their roles by bashing the schools for not providing students with a foundation in basic skills. Inadequate preparation in skill development, they contend, is the reason at-risk students need tutorial support. This negative commentary directed at the schools is typically based on myth instead of reality because the learning problems of at-risk students are usually connected to more than one cause.

To promote better cooperation with private tutors and clinics, schools should reach out to these resources and attempt to maintain effective communication with them. One way of supporting such communication is for building principals to visit local tutorial agencies and to observe their instructional efforts firsthand. Then, private tutors should be invited to the schools and offered similar opportunities to observe classroom teaching and learning. These mutual observations and subsequent discussions provide a powerful source of communication, which not only builds trust between and among the key players but also clarifies their supportive roles. With this foundation established, classroom teachers and private tutors can plan their lessons with greater congruence so that instruction and assessment in both settings are connected to similar

themes, concepts, activities, strategies, skills, and resources.

As the school year progresses, however, busy professionals tend to forget the value of ongoing communication. Consequently, curricular congruence may occur less often, and the key players may slip into their old habits of criticizing each others' efforts and motives. To prevent this negative scenario, classroom teachers and private clinicians should have weekly telephone conversations to establish current instructional priorities and to monitor students' progress in learning. Additionally, portfolio use provides a substantive basis for congruent planning, since teachers and clinicians can reflect on artifacts in the portfolios--writing samples, results of reading attitude inventories, teacher/clinician anecdotes of reading/writing behaviors, checklists, etc.--and can use this information to support at-risk learners' strengths and needs.

As schools and outside tutorial agencies develop greater understanding of and appreciation for each others' important roles, students benefit emotionally and academically. Meanwhile, this growing partnership has the potential to prevent schools from being victimized by unwarranted criticism.

Sometimes reactive is proactice

Last year, **The New York Times** provided excellent coverage of whole language practices at a Long Island school district. This series of articles focused on realistic challenges that classroom teachers deal with each day. The articles represented a balanced perspective by describing the joys and frustrations of responding to the needs of a diverse population of learners.

I therefore was disappointed to read a private tutor's letter to the editor in which he criticized whole language with unsubstantiated, negative rhetoric and accused one of the teachers in the series of "outright malpractice." Although I resented being placed in a reactive position, I nonetheless was compelled to react/proact by writing a letter to the

editor in support of whole language and of the teacher who was unjustly criticized. In the letter, I indicated that the critic has a long history of disparaging educational innovations and of attacking progressive teachers and administrators who believe in these worthwhile ideas. I also said that the critic fails to realize that educators like the one he attacked work in the real world of heterogeneous classes, ranging from at-risk learners to gifted students, from individuals who use English as a second language to those who use English fluently, and from learners who are reared in disadvantaged homes to students who are more advantaged. Furthermore, I indicated that unlike the critic who has a private practice perspective, highly competent and caring teachers like the one he criticized must be flexible as they support whole-class activities, small-group interactions, and individual conferences; as they become involved in daily comprehensive planning that emphasizes connections between skills and instructional activities that are meaningful and interesting; and as they support an instructional direction that not only helps students become proficient readers and writers, but also nurtures their lifetime love of literacy.

In responding to the critic's pretentious objectivity concerning whole language research, I wrote that whole language is a relatively new innovation and that related studies are not as extensive as research with more conventional approaches. I also provided a synopsis of some of the substantive information that does exist, such as whole language classrooms are qualitatively and quantitatively more advantageous than traditional classrooms that focus on isolated skills. Finally, I gave a few examples of research-supported successes: students who are immersed in authentic learning activities read and write with greater fluency and meaning, and they also read and write about a greater diversity of topics and subject matter.

In the last part of my letter to the editor, I said that although whole language is not a panacea, its appropriate implemention increases students' potential for using their

literacy throughout their lives. I then commended educators like the one who was unjustly criticized for possessing the humanism, substance, and courage for reaching out to a diversity of learners and helping them respond positively to immediate and future challenges in literacy.

During the next several weeks, I received extensive feedback from professors, classroom teachers, administrators, and parents. Their comments were overwhelmingly supportive of the strong position I had taken in defending the teacher who was attacked and the philosophy that was criticized. While I still resent being placed in a reactive role, the feedback I received helped me realize that sometimes reacting is proacting. Another lesson I learned is that although we never will eliminate all unsubstantiated and unjustified criticism of our professional efforts, we must direct much of our energy toward strategies that are aimed at preventing negative interpretations of our work.

We value skills

Students, parents, administrators, teachers, and tutors should work cooperatively to reinforce the perspective that skills are genuinely valued and that they are connected to meaningful contexts during daily instructional practice. The suggestions presented in this month's column attempt to support this thrust, even though they are not comprehensive, are not prescriptive, and are not intended for use in a linear progression. Their strength lies in their potential to be proactive so that everyone's attention is directed away from school bashing and instead is focused more positively on helping students become literate and productive members of society.

More proactive suggestions

- Remind parents that their children are more likely to improve their reading and writing when literacy materials are available in the home, when reading for pleasure is encouraged in the home, when literacy resources are discussed in the home, and when parents are frequently observed as literacy-role models.

- Share with parents professional literature that is user-friendly, such as the "Parents and Reading" section of **Reading Today**, a bimonthly newspaper of the International Reading Association, and **NAEPfacts**, a product of the National Center for Education Statistics.

- Discuss with parents the importance of higher-order thinking skills and show how these skills are taught as "basics" to all learners.

- Support positive parent-teacher interactions that initially focus on what students **can do** with listening, talking, reading, writing, and problem-solving; then, provide parents with practical strategies for responding to their children's learning needs (e.g., paired reading, ConStruct, and ERRQ).

- Give parents monthly curriculum maps that outline the skills, strategies, and content to be covered.

- Organize a curriculum fair so that parents can observe their children's learning outcomes (e.g., projects, portfolios, and exhibits) that represent a proficient blending of skills and content.

- Invite parents to workshops that clarify important connections between skills and meaningful learning and that provide parents with the tools for supporting these connections.

- Inform needy parents of outside agencies and organizations (including Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Social Services, Crisis Intervention Services, Child Abuse Prevention Information Resources Center, and Mental Health Association) and give these parents related information concerning a summary of specific services and the names and telephone numbers of contact persons.

- Write articles in the school district's public relations newsletter that describe innovative ways in which students are learning to "master" skills in the context of meaningful, interesting learning.

- Add to these proactive suggestions and share them with colleagues through the Internet and through brief articles in professional journals.

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